

THE AIMS AND METHOD OF HIGHER LITERARY STUDIES¹

I

THE LURE OF SOURCES

IT is an awe-inspiring thought that the caveman, determined to rear his children according to the light of his mind, made them repeat such magic sounds as tradition had handed down to him—words of witchcraft, tales of war and hunting, or propitiatory homage addressed to the fearful powers of the sky. Those spells had a meaning, more or less clearly caught; they had a virtue beyond the mere value of the terms, in their music and rhythm; the incantation stirred a dim sense of the beautiful, appealed to the imagination, shaped the sensibilities of the young men and women who prepared to take up the duties of life in their turn. Thus began the use of literature as a means of education. The sacred texts would be first learned by heart; then, they would have to be explained, as language had passed on to a new stage, and their form was antiquated; thus the race of grammarians and commentators would arise. Next, the full power of the mysterious syllables had to be made accessible to slower or less gifted intelligences, and the critic was born, pointing out beauties and assessing values. Lastly, a more advanced age, feeling itself wonderfully modern, grew curious about those relics of the

¹ A series of three lectures delivered at the Rice Institute on January 3, 4, and 5, 1929, by Louis Cazamian, Professor of Modern English Literature and Civilization in the Faculty of Letters of the University of Paris.

past for the sake of a bygone time; they were scrutinized for the testimony they bore as to the moods of long dead generations; and the history of literature started on its career. Ever since, the achievements of poets and writers in song and story have held a place of honor in the activities of all schools, colleges, and seminaries of learning. Twenty-five centuries ago, Homer was taught to boys and girls throughout the Greek world; today, students over the planet are trained in the scholarly study of texts. Seminars are conducted, theses written, and the number of books about books grows by several thousands every year. So ancient is the habit, so august the whole tradition, that one may well pause in doubt and misgiving at the prospect of looking too closely into the forms which they have assumed of late. However, the step must be taken—not, indeed, with a view to testing the value of literature as an educational instrument: that we are content to accept on trust from the wisdom of all ages—but so as to probe the manner in which literature is taught at present.

Its teaching in universities still somewhat obeys the three-fold impulse out of which the crafts of the grammarian, of the critic and of the scholar have grown. It purports to be at once a culture of the mind, meant to quicken the perception of beauty in verbal expression; a formative training of taste, and of the critical faculty; an apprenticeship to research, and to the investigation of the literary past. Such is the order in which those aims have developed; but the modern religion of science has reversed it. History is queen, and the modest nursing of the sensibilities is thrown quite into the shade. Criticism comes in between, bound up with history more or less, and sharing in its dignity. The trend is thus to regard the simple enjoyment of books as only the concern of the secondary school; and we shall but follow

the practice of our time, by making the first of those aims the last in our survey.

* * *

In each and every province of our life indeed, the scientific habit of thought has made its influence felt; it has entered into the very temper of our minds. The higher study of literature might have seemed entitled to a position of proud independence; the years are not yet far away, when letters claimed to share with science the privilege of being a value in themselves, and the possession of such virtue as would make them, without any substantial addition or change, an instrument for the shaping of youth. This doctrine is not disowned yet, so far as the lower degrees of teaching are concerned; but in the field of higher education, it has been settled, for half a century or so, that the study of literature was powerless by itself to justify its traditional tenure of a large place in academic exercises. It must needs be enlivened and strengthened with an infusion of a spirit and method entirely alien to its own. To train the æsthetic sense, and to deepen that reflection upon life, which an intelligent study of great books can nourish, were not objects of sufficient worth to occupy fruitfully the minds of young men and women who had selected the humanities for their vocation. The necessity to think scientifically was so great and pressing, that to inculcate the habit through other studies would not suffice; it should impregnate all disciplines; and if literature was to survive as a staple subject in higher teaching, it must be brought into line with activities directly controlled by the systematic purpose of organized knowledge.

There was a fair case for the argument; the more so, as science did not pretend to annex the whole extent of the realm it was invading. It only demanded a share; the

instrument of letters was to serve its several ends at once; the new use it was put to did not necessarily conflict with the former; on the contrary, a methodical interpretation of books in the same light as other natural facts would broaden the perception of their artistic attributes and human interest. Such was the plea of the many sincere and enthusiastic scholars who were responsible for the refashioning of literary education in its higher spheres. That they made good their promise, on the whole, it would be difficult to deny; and they were themselves signal proof of the value of their faith; erudition and method did not blunt their taste or deaden their sensibilities. But with the passing of time, the revolution effected in scholarship has further developed its consequences; its results are better apparent; the excesses, the seeds of which are contained in each new departure of thought and life, have grown and flourished rankly. It may not be inopportune to point out some of the latter, in the course of a survey too brief not to remain very incomplete.

There are various kinds of scientific knowledge; but some are more typical than the others, as their quality is, so to say, more concentrated and essential. If to know is to organize facts, the organization is the more striking, and seems the more efficient, as it is closer and firmer. The whole history of the moral sciences for a century is that of the attempts which have been repeatedly made, to extend to them the stricter rules and simpler processes that obtained in the world of matter. Again and again, the study of man in his diverse aspects as a moral agent had to free itself from the contagion of practices and methods that clashed with the nature of its object. What is wrong with the higher study of literature, as generally pursued at present, is that it lives upon an antiquated notion of the nature and activity

of mind; it keeps repeating, on its own account, errors which have long been exploded in other and more important branches of the moral sciences.

Much is, of course, unexceptionable in the technique which has grown round the editing, deciphering and interpreting of texts. Three generations of scholars have produced a set of recommendations and rules, in the mass certainly not empirical, but which, again, one should not describe as merely deductive. The handbooks that have been written to guide the research worker on his way are most of them admirable; and the doctrine which they teach is not only efficient; it is modest and sane. The genuine student knows that he is not to put his trust entirely in method; a sound notion of the complexity of literary problems, a sense of diffidence as to the results of conjecture, an acceptance of intuition for all that it may be worth, a respect for the spontaneousness of the creative mind, have been instilled into him. But, when all is said, and if the tree is to be judged by its fruit, the technique of literary studies seems in some danger of being hardened and fossilized; it is narrowed, in practice, to a monotonous and somewhat mechanical routine; last, not least, it receives, as a technique, an excessively large amount of attention, and this not in a special department, but through the main body and trunk of higher teaching.

To take up the last point first, it seems obvious that training in that field is of direct utility only to the intended specialist. Let future scholars be taught the lore of research work; they are, after all, but a few. Might it be, then, that the closer exactness which the habit of methodical inquiry can add to literary enjoyment, in itself justifies the time and strength devoted to that apprenticeship by the common run of students? And even if a training in the craft of

literary research is of actual use only to the would-be craftsman, might not its universal cultivation be supported on the plea that it possessed intrinsic pedagogic worth?

No doubt, to study a problem for its own sake is a lesson in disinterestedness; to sift truth from error, gauge the value of conjectures, and work out the rights and wrongs of a subject, sharpens the critical faculty, and breeds in the over-hasty temper of the young that prudence, that suspension of judgment, without which there is no sane outlook upon life. And while a methodical habit of mind is not conducive in itself to the greater enjoyment of literature, it induces a mood of modesty and self-diffidence, which should increase the respect with which great books are approached. The research worker feels that he is doing his mite toward the furthering of a large end; should even his own share in the collective task offer him but scant reward, he is cheered—or ought to be cheered—by the ennobling sense of coöperation and self-sacrifice. There resides in the austere activity of the man who acquits himself well of relatively menial duties the spirit of team work, a moral and social influence of no small value.

Thus the orthodox advocate of research. But the flesh of the worker is apt to groan under the ordeal; while his soul, strange to say, shows little sense of the benefit which it receives. What ails him, is the uneasy impression that his most natural appetites are repressed and starved. It might be otherwise; but a training which should offer a wide scope, is too often restricted to one province of its domain. There is breadth, no doubt, in the faith; but it is narrow in its usual application. And just as this fact is of great practical import, going far to sterilize the fecundity of the whole endeavor, it is in itself of very pregnant significance. There, and nowhere else, lies the root of the whole matter.

A connection of some sort will always appear, between the general philosophy of a period, and its characteristic activities in all fields. The higher study of literature was organized during the latter half of the nineteenth century, under the spell of determinist views and an "atomistic" notion of the nature of mind. The main conceptions of psychology have since that time undergone a thorough change; but the influence of the associationist doctrine that prevailed fifty years ago is still strongly stamped upon the craft of the literary student.

At the back of the vast effort which is being heroically pushed forward in thousands of advanced literary courses, there lies an unformulated faith, which might be expressed as follows: all facts have a cause; literary works are products; they are to be accounted for by their antecedents, and can be. Not only are they, in their mass, an aspect of mental and æsthetic civilization, to be studied and explained along with other symptoms of intellectual activity; and not only is the history of literature one of the minor moral sciences, entering with other branches into the concrete sociological study of man; but each work individually is to be analyzed into its component parts: it is, when all is said, the result of certain circumstances, which can and should be, as far as possible, investigated and known. The ideal aim of the research student is to gather all the elements that went to the making of a book, just as the chemist analyzes a compound into its constituent principles. When each and every one of those data has been found, the study of literature is on a par with the sciences of the physical world, in the proud feeling of the complete satisfaction which it gives the inquiring mind. It reaches a thorough and final explanation of its object.

Such is the prevailing ideal, under the spell of which

literary research seems to have been everywhere organized. Its methods have been consciously worked out, so as to gather all the facts, to establish their connection safely, and to build them up into a system, the inner cogency of which would be identical with the very process which produced the work studied, as the cause produces the effect.

Now the psychology of fifty years ago did encourage and indeed prompted such ambitions and efforts. Most ideas of the mind were then regarded as combinations of simple elements into complex wholes. The law of association was the key to the higher intellectual activities; what more natural, than to take it as the key to artistic and literary creation as well? The view would thus be generally accepted, that a book was the sum of constituent parts—themes, images, notions, suggestions—which the writer had picked up in the course of his experience; life accounted for most of these, and other books did account for the rest. To explain a poem triumphantly was to find out all the influences that had entered into its conception and execution; to know an author was to be acquainted with the origins of all the ideas in his mind; and so literary history was mainly the investigation of sources.

Such an approach to knowledge was beset, no doubt, with difficulties; but it was, after all, under the circumstances, the least arduous to follow; it represented, in fact, the line of least resistance. "Sources" are most often tangible things; it is easier to deal with the obvious elements of a work, than to penetrate into its inner meaning. Thus it is that the higher teaching of literature has been led into the grooves where it is still mainly at present. Two-thirds of its energy are absorbed by the investigation of definite individual origins. To open a learned periodical, or consult a list of theses, is to come across a thick growth of that

exuberant weed. A seminar loses half its prestige, unless it is devoted to somebody's influence upon somebody. And the materials with which, apparently, a full explanation of the entire body of literature is at last, some day, to be given, are heaped up with untiring ant-like industry.

But the view of the human mind implied in that position is no longer held, or tenable. The stress has been shifted, from the combination of elementary ideas into complex ones, to the activity of consciousness, the interpenetration of its moments, the originality of qualitative states; and absolute determinism has lost its ascendancy. The spontaneous character of mental life is accepted on all hands. In the light of these new notions, the ceaseless investigation of origins, as it is now conducted, is seen decidedly at a disadvantage.

To ignore that line of inquiry altogether would be of course a grievous excess. In order to comprehend an age of thought or literature, we need to know what broad currents of influence have helped to impregnate the intelligence or the imagination of men with certain themes, conceptions and moods; the interrelation of cultures, groups and periods is an essential chapter in the study of the past. Even with the individual writers and works, the history of their development is part and parcel of that effort to understand, without which there is no knowledge worthy of the name. It may not be immaterial to lay our hands on the sources from which a passage is derived, when the external origin of the ideas or words can throw light on their obscure or ambiguous meaning. There is food for reflection, if not for very varied or enriching thought, in the unexpected places from which the images that throng a poet's work may have gathered; in the strange ways and devious courses of inspiration.

But the value which we should attach to the search for sources is thus seen to be essentially relative, and every case has to prove its claim. It may be, it often is, interesting or useful to know from where the materials of a book were borrowed. The mistaken and exaggerated assumption is that it is always interesting and useful; that we should systematically inquire into the sources of all works ranking as literature; that all such inquiries must smell sweet to the nose of the scholar; that it is possible to bring together all the constituent elements of books in that way; and that there is sanity in the universal effort thus initiated, in the desperate search for the materials which have entered into the whole body of literature, spending on that endless task the best energies of young people with a genuine taste for letters.

In those principles, not often stated fully, but too often acted upon, there hides a mistaken notion of the aim and method of literary studies. Indeed, one might go so far as to say that the doctrine, in its crudest form, is a soul-killing fetish. It is not possible to gather all the materials out of which a work of literature has grown; and if we could have them all in our hand, they would be only dry bones; the spirit that breathed upon them is everything.

It is not necessarily interesting to know the sources of a book. The inventors of sources usually do not explain much that matters. They do not account for the work of the artist; they do not effectively substitute a mechanical combination of parts for the living act of creation; so far as this act is concerned—and it is the all in all of literature—they do not even, in most cases, throw a revealing or an instructive light upon it. The conclusions of any significance to be drawn from the study of sources are very few. A dozen scrutinies of the kind will establish some

elementary facts, all of which we knew before, or which we might have foreseen: the materials of a writer come to him in the most various ways, and those ways may be sub-conscious as well as conscious; he may take much from sources most alien to his purpose, and most unexpected; there is no limit to the transforming and idealizing power of imagination, working upon the data which memory has gathered; etc. . . . Such findings, and the like, are the harvest to be reaped from the investigation of origins; to take stock of them once, and pass on, would be enough. They leave each individual problem very much where it stood; the help which they afford to the study of each is but slight.

It is not conceivable, lastly, that a complete natural history of literature should be put together in that way, with the skeletons of all the works reconstructed bone by bone, all the bones duly labelled and fitted into their places. There will always be lacking, from the sum total of such studies, whatever is energy, vital spark, creative invention; the real substance and manner of growth will not even have been touched upon. There is no accounting from the outside for the genesis of a book worthy of notice; in the process thus sketched out, it is the missing links only that matter. The number of elements that went to the writing of one work is infinite; no reckoning of them will ever be full; those that are most essential are elusive, intangible, cannot be caught and pinned down on the page. A library of research work dealing with sources is an aggregate of inert matter, mostly dead.

And yet, one can sympathize with the desperate attempt to know how a masterpiece "was made". There is no fault to find, in principle, with the will to take beautiful things to pieces; with the search for the why and the wherefore. The purpose of science is of course sacred. It is the method here

that is disappointing, not the quest that is wrong. But if the analysis is to explain its object, the right sort of elements are to be dissociated, and the synthetic force that not only brought them together, but fused them into a whole, is to be recaptured. Now this is no impossible task; and the right sort of criticism—the creative—is able to perform it in such a way as to give us adequate explanations. This will be the subject of the next stage in our inquiry.

Meanwhile, it may be no unfit conclusion to those rather negative remarks, that we should turn in admiration and homage to what appears, at first sight, a signal example of the study of sources at its best. Professor John Livingston Lowes' book, *The Road to Xanadu*, need hardly be introduced to minds in touch with the movement of literature. No methodical investigation could be more thorough; and no reader has dipped into that beautiful work without feeling its fascination. But the lesson of the book is all in favor of our argument. The problem is here definitely carried on to the psychological plane. What the author gives us is a direct view of the transforming power of imagination. We are made a party to the process through which the passive images gathered by experience and reading are infused with an active life, and form into original aggregates. As a strikingly clear survey of the "subconscious alchemy" which lies at the root of invention, no research could be more convincing.

And yet, the book, strong as it is, fails to persuade us entirely. One cannot help thinking that what is amiss with it is just its attempt at the full dissociation of a poem into its constituent elements. In so far as Professor Lowes wants to bring together all the materials of the *Ancient Mariner*, we feel that his net, however masterly the hand that throws

it, will not catch the most essential factors of the product. Every single detail may be accounted for; the dovetailing of the themes, images and incidents may be perfect: still, there never was a work of art produced in that way. It is all very well for the critic himself to point out that his analysis is not, cannot be, exhaustive: it is carried away by the enthusiasm of source-finding, and inevitably places the main stress on what remains of secondary importance only. The truly creative principle, when all is said, is the whole personality of Coleridge; that organic, unanalyzable energy did enter into the growth of the poem at every stage; it presided over all the choice of expression. By the side of that deeper activity, the playing and sifting of subconscious images in the recesses of memory must be regarded as more external. And even the other piece subjected to the same test, *Kubla Khan*, did not only sing itself out to a passive spirit; spontaneous and miraculous as this pure gem of fancy may be, it bears the imprint of the mind that made it; really to explain it would be to explain the verbal gifts and the musical instincts of Coleridge's self. Are these in other ways to be explained? Not exactly; but they are to be approached, felt, realized, caught intuitively, we shall see, as far as they can be known at all.

We are not prepared to believe, either, that the study here made of the two poems does reveal to us the precise methods that always govern poetical invention. It sheds a welcome light on the working of an eminent poet's fancy; but hardly any inference can be drawn from it, beyond a few conclusions, of a general nature, which we knew or suspected before. At bottom, the case of every artist, and, indeed, of every poem, is unique; no binding law controls the growth of mental products. Professor Lowes has brilliantly exhausted the possibilities of the search for sources

in a privileged instance; his inquiry, bearing on an exceptionally fit subject, most usefully confirms some pre-existing but rather vague ideas as to the psychology of invention. Beyond this, even that most uncannily shrewd discoverer of sources could not go. His book would keep its solid worth, if it did not attempt to say all, where a general lesson is conveyed, rather than particular texts fully accounted for; and the thesis that he does make good, others need not take up after him.

Indeed, the time-honored maxim that the exception is a proof of the rule, might be here aptly recalled. What makes the *Road to Xanadu* one of the outstanding works of criticism in recent years, is the skill, insight and talent of the critic, no less than the glamor that attaches to Coleridgian problems. Whether, after having read that large-sized volume, we are actually possessed of all the ingredients that went to the making of two relatively short poems, is not only uncertain, but most improbable; and to tell the truth, it does not much matter.

From the way along which the organized study of literature is being pushed further every day, we are thus called back to paths somewhat less ambitious, that do not seem to set out quite so straight toward that goal of scientific knowledge—the discovery of causes. There we may find, however, the living, concrete intelligence of the literary work, the realization of its inner aim; and such a grasp of its development, as will allow us to share in the creative activity of the artist. Could we have that, we need not feel any regret. Not the spectacular dissociation of the work into its elements, not the hunt for its material origins and sources, will give us the illuminating sense of its growth; but an intuitive process, the nature and the conditions of which we must now try to make clear. To understand, in

this plane, is primarily the business of the critical faculty. What can the critic do, what should he do, since the search for the historical explanation of works finds its crowning virtue and reality in criticism?

Let us then depart, in respect and awe, from the vast empire of scholarship, whose law it seems to be that the waters of the spirit, there, do not run freely over the earth, refreshing it, but flow underground, so that the devoted band of the source-finders has to dig and burrow for them, with the hope, at best, of a little moisture finally in the desert sand. Before we cross back, however, to the blessed land of everyman, we may hearken for a while to the pathetic outcry of that anonymous professor, who in the *Atlantic Monthly* for last September,¹ relieved his overburdened soul. “. . . How heavy has been, and is, the weight of learned volumes, of commentary, exegesis, under which both pedagogue and student must stagger in order to fulfill contemporary academic demands. Month by month and week by week they multiply, tomes, articles, pages upon pages upon the reading of a word or phrase, discussion after discussion upon some minute point of fact, as to the authenticity of a perhaps unimportant fragment or disputed date. . . . If huge tomes, giving an *omnium-gatherum* of all documents, important and unimportant, significant and insignificant, that can in any way be associated with an author, increase and multiply, where will it all stop? . . . Not an assembly of all the phrases he may ever have encountered, paragraphs upon which he may have stumbled through his lifetime, will ever betray his secret. No array of facts, no amount of psychological theory, can interpret that mysterious inner alchemy whereby the stuff of common

¹ “The Pedagogue in Revolt”, by a College Professor: *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 1928.

life is transmuted into gold. . . . How many times, in toiling over note and variant, early reading and later reading, in preparation for the solemn task of teaching poetry to the young, have I felt that way, without confessing it to myself or others! . . ." Alas, what is to be done? "Decorum in academic life must be maintained. Yet, for safety, suppressed feelings must come out, in the gospel according to Freud. . . . Here am I who should at this moment be getting ready for my seminar, given this year for the nineteenth time, . . . wantonly wasting precious time. Is it a touch of spring? . . . I am as one stricken. Should I resign?"

Resign, my sincere and suffering brother? Surely not; keep on teaching the young, you have the root of the matter in you. Only be of better cheer; help is coming. We are many who labor in spirit, they are few who really prosper and rejoice; let us lift up our voices together, and the walls of Jericho shall fall.